

DARK DREAMS







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THE CURE

Malcolm Furnass

WHEN HE LEARNED that he had only a few months left to live, Nevil's only visible reaction was a slight twitching of the eyelids.

"A malignant tumour," he was told. "I'll see about getting you in for some tests right away, but with the rate of infiltration it seems unlikely that..." The words carried on, filling the surgery with brittle, empty sounds. The room's antiseptic sheen lent a buffer to reality. Nevil searched around for something to relate to, something warm and natural that would give the doctor's pronouncement some meaning...but in vain. It was only later, after he had returned home, that the doctor's words finally sunk in.

For a while he managed to keep up the pretence of carrying on as normal. Everyone knew, of course, and he studiously ignored the way their eyes followed him around the school's grounds. He took to walking a lot whenever he had some free time between classes. He knew of the tongues that wagged behind him; of how heads shook and voices would lower as they watched poor Mr.Green tramping over the fells above the school. "Taking it all in," they would say, understandingly, "while he's still able." But it was not that at all. As far as he was concerned, neither he nor his appreciation of the subtleties of nature had changed in the slightest. Rather, it was the uneasy pall that his presence brought in the staff room that drove him outside so often. But still, he had to admit, the surrounding countryside was starting to look exceptionally vivid this year. The drabness of winter had not yet faded, lending a crystalline sharpness to the emerging blooms. Even the small cluster of buildings that comprised Lakeside Mountaineering School looked almost picturesque, etched starkly as they were against the grey-green expanse of water that filled the valley.

The Warden was on his way somewhere when Nevil got back to the school. He grinned broadly from the open front door of his car. "Afternoon, Nevil. Nice day for a walk. That mist hasn't cleared yet, I see."

"No." The two had never really got on well. Banks was too unyielding with the boys. Nevil always considered himself an intermediary figure; the one to soften the friction between the two factions.

"Look, May and I have always been meaning for you and Beth to have dinner with us. How does tonight sound?"

"Well, thanks, but I don't think -"

"We'll leave it open then. Some other time." The door slammed shut.

"But I'm going to hold you to it."

Nevil watched the car wend its way along the lake road until it became just a flicker among the distant trees. No, he had never particularly liked Banks.

Beth was busy with dinner when he got home that night. The house was looking more like a tv. commercial than ever. Its upkeep had become an obsession with Beth lately. Everything had to be just so; washed, cleaned, vacuumed, swept, dusted, beaten and shined to perfection. Just like a surgery, he thought unkindly.

"I was talking to Banks earlier," he said as he sat down to the meal. She finished wiping a gravy stain off the cooker and joined him. "He doesn't appear to have had any word back yet about my application. But with the local expenditure cutbacks a replacement seems unlikely, so this place will not be wanted. Of course, you'll have to start paying rent, but -"

"Oh, stop it!" She was staring at the table and her head scrunched down between her shoulders so hard that it shook.



"But we can't just ignore it," he said. She was rubbing at a spot on the tablecloth with her thumb nail. He reached out a hand and she withdrew hers.

"I know!" She stood up; and he did, too. "I know. That's what makes it all so...impossible."

In an earlier day she would have put her arms around him. He wanted her to now, more than anything in the world. But the rift between them was too great, and widening all the time.

He was in the City General for nearly a fortnight. It took them that long to tell him what he already knew. Beth visited him every day, bringing along the well-wishes of the staff; but very little passed between them. When he returned home he could see in her face just how frail he'd become. His gaunting features could no longer be glossed over: Banks never again mentioned that dinner invitation.

Nevil took up his duties again, even though everyone actively encouraged him not to. They honoured his wishes, however, and it was only afterwards that the concept of a dying man's last request came forcibly to his mind. It was not long before he asked for additional night duties, too. Sleep had not been coming easily of late, and he knew that his nocturnal pacing was irritating Beth. This request was also granted, though somewhat more timorously, as if his presence near the sleeping boys was an undesirable thing.

He was struck by that notion himself one night as he peered into a darkened dormitory and saw his shadow laid out before him in the elongated rectangle of door-light. Gangling, skeletal, clad in ill-fitting clothes...it was like a spectre of death - a figure to be shunned, to be shut out of the lives of his youthful charges. But before he managed to close the door, he noticed a nearby pair of eyes watching him intently. It was young Beeching: Nevil crossed over to him. He felt a particular fondness for that boy. Why his parents had chosen to send such a fallow, un-outdoorsy youth as he on a course like this, Nevil couldn't imagine. Or maybe he could: to Make A Man of him - it seemed important to some people.

"You should be asleep," Nevil whispered.

"Is it true?" said the boy. "Are you going to die?"

He couldn't lie to the boy. "Who's been telling you that?"

"But is it true?"

Outside the dormitory, footsteps sounded on the gravel driveway that led down to the road. A car stopped some distance away, then started up again.

"Go to sleep. Mr. Bickerstaffe will be here soon and you know what a stickler he is about lights-out." He couldn't look the boy in the eyes. He left the room and closed the door, feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself.

A little later Bickerstaffe came to relieve him. He was wearing his customary blue track suit: he was rarely seen in anything else.

"Say, Nevil, where's Beth going at this time of night?"

"What?"

Bickerstaffe's smile faded. "Christ, I'm sorry, Nevil. I saw her catching a taxi a few minutes ago. She had a suitcase with her, but I never gave it a thought. Look - if there's anything I can do..."

"Sure," said Nevil. "Thanks."

The terrace where most of the staff lived was a recent extension to the school premises. Each house was as functional and featureless as all the others. But as Nevil approached, there was one - his own - that caught the eye first. It had a look of emptiness about it.

He found the note inside:

"Please understand. I can not stay any longer. I know it sounds selfish, but this is the only way. I don't know where I am going, but I've got to get away before it gets too much for me. Please forgive me for not being strong."

It was unsigned.

Nevil was not a drinking man - but that night he raided the drinks cabinet and had a little more than was good for him. He could not be sure afterwards what had prompted him to go walking. It had probably just seemed the natural thing to do. Out on the fells he was free. Here there were no pretensions or taboos, no social mores to uphold, and no responsibilities. One had only to be oneself.

The effects of the alcohol were subsiding. The altitude made his head feel pleasantly light, but the cold prevented him from enjoying it. He should have brought a coat - but, hell, it was supposed to be summer, wasn't it? Something caught his attention. He had seen it earlier and taken it to be one of the few stars out that night. But now he could see quite plainly that it was a small fire nearby.

It turned out to be farther away than he'd thought. Or at least navigating the intervening dips and rises in almost complete darkness made it seem that way. But at last - and when he was least expecting it - the fire was there before him; on the lee side of a huge boulder perched on top of a hill. A man's figure was lying against the rock just outside the small circle of firelight.

"Come forward, friend, and warm yourself."

Nevil did so, squinting.

"It's a cold night to be wandering the fells." The man's voice was thick, with a slight slur. His stubbled chin and cheeks shone in the firelight.

"It's cold down there, too. Makes no difference where I am tonight."

"Ahh, kindred spirits. The world is ours tonight; tomorrow lies still aborning." He reached into his shapeless raincoat and proffered a slim bottle.

Why not? Nevil thought, accepting. He wasn't sure what was in it, but it burned all the way down. He handed the bottle back. "Green's the name, Nevil Green."

"Call me Harry." He took a long swig from the bottle. "Everyone does around here."

"You're from these parts? Your accent doesn't quite..."

"No, can't say I'm from anyplace in particular. I move around a lot. Have done for as long as I remember...maybe even longer."

Nevil shifted about to warm his other side. "Every day a new chal-

lenge. How I envy you. I've never really thought about it before, but people like you have it made."

The old man gave a crack-toothed grin.

"No - I mean it. So many people are content - eager, even - to be part of society, the community, whatever, that they forget about their own lives until it's too late. You are one of the few who live only for yourself. You are free; and that, my friend, is to be envied."

"To freedom, then." The other man raised the bottle to his lips, then passed it to Nevil.

"And the time to enjoy it." The liquid scorched down his throat. He had never tasted anything quite like it before. He looked at the bottle, but there was no label - and, strange this, it seemed to be still as full as when it had first been offered to him.

"Ah, yes," the old man was saying, "there's the rub." Nevil's vision was blurring and he made a concentrated effort to correct it. "The fragility of life. Eventually our tomorrows get crushed under the weight of yesterdays. But suppose, like me, you treated every day the same - always did and always shall - would not your tomorrows and yesterdays forever balance each other out?"

"Well, I suppose so, but - " Everything was growing hazy, and Nevil just wanted to shut the man up. His voice was starting to rasp in Nevil's ears.

"I'm talking about the prolongation of life, man. How old do you think I am?"

"Oh, 'bout sixty, seventy."

"Not even close. And if I can do it, why can't you?"

"Why not, indeed?" Nevil murmured quite happily.

"Or maybe you want to die."

Nevil sobered at that. The whole evening's forgetting was forgotten; everything was in perspective again. "No. I don't want to die. God only knows how much I want to live. I'd give anything...do anything...to stay alive."

The old man smiled. "Have another drink."

The bottle was still in Nevil's hand.

Why not, indeed?

There was another trickle of distilled fire down his throat and then ...nothing.

When he awoke, both the bottle and the old man were gone. It was morning. The sun was well up and the mist was scudding over the fell. Nevil ached everywhere, especially his head. And he was so cold; he had never known it so cold before.

The trek home was torture. If anyone saw him arrive they kept quiet about it. The condition he was in today, he didn't blame them. he would not be missed at school: he had had repeated assurances that they would cover for him whenever...

He switched on the fire and knelt before it. But he couldn't seem to get close enough to properly warm himself. Maybe a hot bath would have done him good, but it didn't seem worth the effort of moving. He managed to doze off for a while, hugging his knees there in front of the fire.

That afternoon, after a complete change of clothes, he ventured across to the school. He was mildly curious as to why no-one had been over to check on him.

"Sorry I never got over, Nevil," said a harried-looking Banks. "But with the accident and all, I just haven't been able to get away."

Nevil had not been unaware of the restrained excitement that gripped the building. "Accident?"

"Terrible thing. The Rawlins boy - drowned up in Whiteways."

"A canoeing accident." Whiteways was that stretch of river favoured for shooting the rapids. "How's Bickerstaffe taking it?"

"As you would expect. I can't see us keeping him on after this. I'll be sorry to lose him."

Nevil didn't flinch. "There'll be an enquiry?"

"Sure, the works. I've already been swamped with officials this

morning. Each one a rung higher than the last. Never known bureaucracy to move so fast. The boy's parents are on their way up. There's going to be hell to pay."

Nevil found Bickerstaffe in the changing room. He was sitting on a bench, his track suit damp and creased, his hair clinging to his forehead in rings. Now it was Nevil's turn to say sorry.

"He kept going under," said Bickerstaffe, reliving it with his eyes. "He had his life-jacket on and he kept bobbing up and down, gagging for air. I had him in my grasp once; and then I could see his eyes, frantic as he was dragged away from me. I've never known the current to be as strong as that."

The affair threatened to drag on for ever. Bickerstaffe was suspended, and the school was very nearly closed down at one stage. Canoeing was dropped altogether from the syllabus and most other activities were toned down; emphasis would be given more to the academic side for the rest of the season. Two of the boys were re-claimed by their parents, despite Banks' assurances; another had to be rushed into hospital with a burst appendix, and from there he was taken home to convalesce.

Nevil did not stray from the school's premises during that period. Work became his life to such an extent that each day brought more and more curious glances. Everyone began to wonder just how much longer he could keep it up. Some even remarked that he was looking well...which was not quite true, of course. What they really meant was that he was not looking any worse.

The fells showed no signs of changing, either. Grim and bare, topped by a bleak sky, they were like a moment frozen in time. Nevil dragged his eyes from the window and surveyed the class. "Where's Beeching this morning?"

"Sick," volunteered an overweight youth with pouting lips. "Matron's with him now. It's the first time he's tried that one to get out of book-work!" An appreciative titter went round the room.

"Silence," said Nevil. He only needed to say it once: these days he wielded absolute power in the classroom.

At the first break he went to check on Beeching and found that the doctor had been called in.

"The boy? Oh, nothing serious. Just a virus. I've told Matron to keep him away from the others for a few days." His eyebrows wrinkled, professionally. "But it's you I'm concerned about. Quite frankly, I'm surprised you're still up and about."

"I feel fine. Considering. I'm just cold all the time...can't seem to get warm."

"Could be a side effect of the tablets."

"No. I stopped taking them weeks ago. The pain's gone."

The doctor raised his eyebrows, most unprofessionally. "Call in to the surgery first chance you get. It's time I gave you another look over."

Within the week he was back in hospital. For three days he was examined, X-rayed, prodded, and re-examined. When released, he was made no wiser and the specialists were still considering their findings. But his case was by no means the only irregularity the hospital had had to cope with. The old man in the bed next to him had died in his sleep one night; and an emergency casualty had died on the operating table with a team of surgeons in attendance.

Returning to school, he wondered if summer was ever going to appear this year. The lake lay sullen and placid beneath an overcast sky. The bare fells separated the two shades of grey. A lone figure stood on top of a hill: Nevil started when he recognised the raincoat. The figure watched as the taxi passed under him and kept watching, apparently, until Nevil could only make him out as a speck in the background.

Nevil twisted around in his seat and was surprised to see another figure some distance ahead. Beth was waiting for him at the school gates. "I called the hospital," she said, once the taxi had gone, "but they said you'd just left."

He glanced up the driveway. "What sort of a welcome did you get up

there?"

"Everyone's very polite."

"I know what you mean," he said. "I've missed you."

"I - "

"Just don't be getting your duster out right away. I've got used to the house the way it is."

Their hands met and clasped.

That night there was an urgent knocking on their door.

"Umm, what is it? Who could that be?"

"It's all right...I'll get it. I wasn't asleep."

It was Veitch, the master on duty.

"Look, Nevil, I'm sorry about this, but I didn't know who to turn to. Banks does not seem himself these - "

"What is it?" Nevil adjusted his dressing gown and pulled tight the sash.

"It's young Beeching. He's feverish...delirious..."

"Beeching? Is that boy still ill?"

"He's been fine these last few days. It suddenly started up again tonight."

They ran in step across the tarmac.

"Matron's with him and the doctor's on his way. But we thought you might be able to calm him down. He seems to get on best with you."

The other boys were huddled in their pyjamas in one corner of the dormitory when they got there. Matron was trying to hold Beeching down, but the boy's skinny frame belied an enormous strength. The bedclothes were jumbled on the floor and he was rolling frantically from side to side, the damp bottom sheet squelching under him. Veitch took hold of a knee and a shoulder. "For Christ's sake, say something, man. Try to get through to him."

The boy's head beat the pillow, first one side then the other. His hair was caked against his scalp, and his reddened face gleamed with perspiration. His temples throbbed almost to bursting point. He was babbling incoherently; pleading, it seemed - alternately sobbing and pleading.

"David - " began Nevil helplessly, "David, can you hear me...?"

"I think it's working, Nevil," said Veitch. "I think it's working...He seems to recognise your voice..."

Encouraged, Nevil moved a little closer. "That's right, David, it's me. You know me, don't you? Yes, that's right, relax...it's going to be all right..."

Slowly, the boy's movements began to subside. At last he lay quite still, his head in profile on the pillow, blinking rapidly. He turned his face upright and Nevil put a reassuring smile on his face.

The boy stared straight at him; and the look in those eyes filled Nevil with sudden horror.

"You!" The young face contorted and the spindly body thrashed wilder than ever. But the eyes remained fixed on Nevil. "Keep away from me...keep away from me!"

"Good God, man, you're making him worse than ever!"

"It's not me he's seeing. It's something deeper. He's looking right through me - he's looking into me!"

"Whatever it is, just get the hell out of here! We can hardly hold him as it is!"

The boy's voice kept rising. "No...no...stay away! No...please no! Not again - I don't want you in me again! Keep awaaaay!" The voice broke into a scream that rose to an impossible pitch.

Then it stopped. And the boy slumped back onto the bed. His breathing was shallow and his body kept jerking spasmodically. The room seemed awfully still and quiet.

"All right, what's going on in here?" Banks came rushing in, still fastening his dressing gown. The boys in the corner behind him were white.

"What's everyone doing out of bed, Veitch?"

"Beeching's ill. We've sent for the doctor."

"And Green?"

"He's been trying to help."

"Well, next time remember that I'm the Warden. I make the decisions around here. Try calling me before you go round raising half the staff."

With his hair uncombed and his generally unkempt appearance, Banks for once looked his age. The strain of the past couple of months was taking its toll. For the first time since he had started working for him, Nevil felt sympathy for the man. Not enough to side against Veitch, but enough not to side with him.

"Okay, boys," he said. "Away and get some fresh bedding. You can put down in the gym tonight."

Faint looks of enthusiasm crossed their faces at that, and they trooped uncertainly up the corridor.

Nevil went outside. Lights were on all over the school and in the houses. The small community was coming alive. Faces were appearing at doors and windows. He heard a voice mention tea, and something about the school's domestic power being off.

Behind the row of houses, other lights appeared on the driveway. The doctor's car. Nevil called back to let Banks know. Then, too late, he saw Mrs. Banks stepping off the end of the kerb.

"May! Get back!"

The car reached the curve at the top of the driveway and she stepped out in front of it before the headlights fell on her. Her scream was broken off abruptly and a metal tray clattered on the ground. The teapot emptied its contents over her.

Her scalded skin began to peel without blistering. The doctor said she must have died instantly. His face was drawn and his voice shook.

Banks was kneeling beside his wife under the car's headlights. His tear-streaked face shone palely as he lifted his head to survey the gathered crowd. His gaze stopped at Nevil, and he started to rise.

"It's you..." Banks tensed up, like a watch spring being wound. "You're responsible for this. For everything that's been happening... It's all been you! I don't know how - but you're living at our expense!"

Before Nevil knew what was happening, Banks had thrown himself through the air toward him. "Don't just stand there gloating, damn you!"

Banks was only a small man, but in his weakened condition Nevil was no match for him. They hit the tarmac together, amid cries of something ghoul and something something vampire. Nevil's head felt as if it had split open. His hands found the other man's throat and managed to silence him. Fingers clawed at his face.

Other hands were on his arms, dragging him back. Voices rang in his ears and faces swam into focus around him. He wanted to cry out, but couldn't seem to find his voice. He wriggled free and let the crowd converge on Banks. The darkness beckoned.

Nevil kept running long after his chest bade him to stop. His breath came in short gasps. The keen air stung the raw gouges in his cheeks and warm trickles of blood found their way to his mouth.

And he was so cold. Dressing gown and carpet slippers were not ideal wear for the fells, but this was more than that. It was inside. His pyjamas were sticky with sweat, and his face was flushed with exertion; but inside he was so terribly cold.

He finally collapsed, shivering, onto the damp sward. If he was to die, let it be here, now...

"No, you're not going to die."

It was the tramp, old Harry.

"What - " Nevil felt his voice rasp, found the words difficult to force out. "What have you done to me?"

"I? I have done nothing. But my medicine can be very potent, don't you agree?"

"The drink!"

"There are many ways to extend my influence. Drink can be one of them."

"My God!"

Old Harry raised an eyebrow. "Prayer, like science, brought you

nothing. Now you have back what you wanted most."

Nevil was sobbing now. "But at what price?"

"To you, nothing. Your body was being ravaged by unrestricted growth. That growth is now being curbed by - well, shall we say 'a presence'? All the other words seem so antiquated. It has no great appetite; the excess your body produces will be enough to sustain it indefinitely."

"But what about the others?" Nevil thought of Beeching, and May Banks; of Rawlins and the river accident; of the two unknowns at the hospital; of the hang-glider incident over the lake last weekend; of the tension building among the staff... And how much more that he knew nothing about?

"My dear chap, you wouldn't begrudge the little fellow his exercise, would you?"

Nevil was still whimpering nearly an hour later when the search party found him. He was curled into a ball with his elbows between his thighs. By the time they had got him to hospital he had slipped into a coma, and all attempts to revive him were fruitless.

The next day a doctor took Beth into his confidence: "His condition seems self-induced, though as yet we cannot ascertain why. It may be subconscious, a way of retreating from his malady; but that's just guess-work."

"You're saying there's no hope?"

"By no means, Mrs. Green. As you know, his case has been under thorough examination. For some unaccountable reason the cancer has stabilised itself. Whereas earlier it was spreading at such a rate for an operation to do any good, we now have every hope -"

Beth's brow furrowed slightly.

"- every hope that by removing the entire affected area -"

"Every...hope. It's been so long since I even considered that word."

"We'll need your permission, of course, but my advice is that we begin as soon as possible. There's no telling when it might start up again."

"And the coma?"

"This could be the one way to bring him out of it. With the root of the problem gone he'll have nothing to retreat from, so to speak."

Much later, Beth was there when he awoke. His vision was blurry, but he could tell she had been crying. There was a white-coated doctor standing at the foot of his bed, clipboard in hand. He was smiling too, but not as openly as Beth. A trolley of beeping gadgetry was parked beside the bed. Up above him a bottle clanked when he moved. A tube hung from it and went down his throat: he couldn't close his mouth for it. He tried to piece it all together.

"You're going to be all right, Nevil." It sounded a bit like Beth.

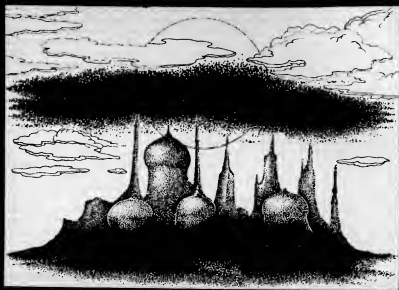
"The operation worked. You're going to be all right!"

The operation? Things were starting to come together now. But why did he feel so cold?

Then he felt the clench of tiny teeth. His body heaved in agony and the tube from his mouth went red. He tried to yell, but could only gargle. Far away there were screams and sounds of commotion.

As things started to go black, the words, "It has no great appetite," went through his mind, and he wondered how many bites it would take.





A RAIN OF SPIDERS

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

ON A DAY OF celebration - the One Hundredth anniversary of the death of Kahmesa the Dreadful - during the height of the sun, upon the heads of thousands of holiday visitors, daily inhabitants, thieves, merchants, mercenaries, entertainers, royalty, tagrags and cutthroats, there fell a rain of spiders so dense that for a moment the high sun was blotted out.

They were large and black and hairy, with leg-spreads larger than a good-sized man's wide open hand. Though they were only a mildly poisonous variety, many people died in the first minutes of the ensuing panic, either of fright or multiple bites, or from being trampled in the rush of screaming peoples who tried all at once to escape through narrow city gates. Some with allergic reactions needed only one bite, and that a small one, to fall in the street to die after most grisly displays and contortions.

The fallen spiders were quite as frantic as the crowd; all the swift creatures wished to do was to find a place to hide, to escape both the heat of the day and the noisy plebians. Many of them sought cover in the hair or down the clothing of whatever person they lighted upon, causing such persons to dance in various remarkable fashions, which further magnified the consternation of the spiders; and so round and round it went until the whole city had gone mad with men, women, the aged and young alike shrieking and running every which way, and the spiders going helter-skelter amidst their feet.

The populace went wild, using any possible object to squash the fearful arachnids, leaving splotches of black and green gore everywhere. One man, in a crazed effort to get a spider off his wife's neck, withdrew his shortsword and swung with such effort that her head was half severed and flopped forward on her bosom. In another case, some poor man beat himself to death, the spiders attached all over his person.

The macabre rain had been of short duration, more suddenly come and gone than a storm of hail. The blazing sun returned anew, and its warmth kept the spiders livened and quick, their multiple eyes watching for the swoop of brooms and sticks and swords; and they scuttled out of destruction's path often enough with all their legs intact. Those legs which were lost one way or another would writhe and kick even without bodies, and many a frightened soul expended much energy thrashing some black leg into sticky powder.

The greatest number of spiders were killed in the first few moments following the dread downpour. Thereafter the number of spider deaths decreased, as they successfully hid in gutter-cracks or else found safety up the sides of walls, out of the assembly's murderous reach. A scant hour later, the people had become afraid to go anywhere or touch anything or look under objects. It was frightful merely to move from a stationary position, for the little beasts now lurked in every likely and unlikely hiding place.

Dogs and pigs roamed the streets and began devouring dead spiders, for scavenging was their time-honoured duty. Even a few nocturnal rats dared the sun (or were forced from their places by spiders) and joined the feast. Soon these animals were growing ill from injecting concentrations of spider-venom and commenced dying everywhere. The sun baked down on the carcasses of spiders, dogs, swine, and rodents, and brought a repugnant odour upon the city with amazing rapidity.

Wails and weeping were heard throughout the city even after the initial panic had subsided. Disorder was the only government. For a while

it looked as though all who had not fled the city at the onset would just stand about with looks of terror until they died of apathy.

Then a man of strong voice - who later became a governor by no coincidence - managed to command a semblance of rationality among a group of individuals who were only slightly less frightened than the rest. Before the sun was down, he had rallied a sizable band to an organised force who went out to cover the city section by section, looking everywhere for lurking spiders, impaling them on stave, stick, sword, poker, or whatever they could find with half a point on it. The hidden spiders were soon lethargic under the cold press of night and were easily destroyed, though less easily found.

When darkness fell, a bonfire burnt mightily and billowed caustic grey smoke over the city square and before the face of the moon. In the orange flames could be seen the skeletons of poisoned scavengers and the withered balls of dead spiders. Thus the city had been spared pestilence and rotting flesh, if that were the least good fortune to come of the night.

By the following morning, as much as could ever be done was completed. Though the city would never really be lacking in large numbers of big black spiders, the inhabitants were at least prepared to return to their homes and adapt to a life wherein every shadow must be avoided due to the leggy demons nesting in all places.

Those visiting celebrators who had fled the city when first the frightful living rain fell, leaving the city dwellers to fend for themselves, never again returned either for celebrations or marketing. When they spread the tale of what had happened there that day, travellers by-passed the city in fear of a recurrence. The city which had once been prosperous was far less so thereafter.

No one would say aloud that Kahmesa had caused the ruination of that region's most popular holiday which had honoured him in such a dubious manner for a hundred years. It was the man with the loud voice, who later became governor, who first assured everyone that it had been a freak wind which had plucked all the spiders from their webs in the hills and dropped them strictly by chance upon a single city. And though such a selective wind might seem improbable, it was no less probable than the alternative possibility, so it was the theory most people chose to believe - at least in conversation.

All the same, those who had been in that city on that day never again celebrated the anniversary of Kahmesa the Dreadful's dying.

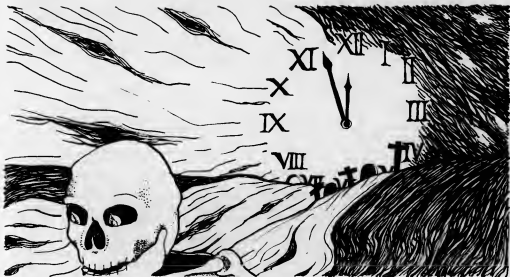


SUICIDE

A feeble moonbeam flickers through the room
And falls by chance upon the livid face
Whose grim, contorted features show no trace
Of human likeness through the mask of doom;
And indistinct from out the semi-gloom
That hangs like mist about the awful place,
The swinging carcase, and the rope-joined space
Between the stiffened neck and rafter, loom.

And Death's grim incense rises in the air
From that long-hanging form; and opposite,
A weak rat crouches near the clammy wall
At which the dim, protruding eye-balls stare;
And no one comes to bring a winding-sheet -
Or breaks the ghastly silence of it all.

NORMAN BOOTHROYD



KILLING TIME

Peter Bayliss

DO YOU REMEMBER THAT old grandfather clock at the farm when we were children? It used to stand in the corner of the dining-room, as tall as the grown-ups. You remember? The case was made from a dark wood like walnut or mahogany, and Aunt Annie used to carefully polish it every day with furniture polish.

You recall those stories Uncle Ben used to tell us about how it was made from the oldest tree in the world? The clock-maker had been a mighty wizard of olden times, he would say, and the clock was magic. If ever it stopped, time itself would stand still.

I expect you remember Aunt Annie telling us how it stopped years later at the exact time of Uncle Ben's death.

Well, I was over at Sevenoaks farm for a few days last summer, and I was tinkering about with the old clock to see if I could get it going again. I don't think Aunt Annie approved. Although she said nothing, I saw that same reproachful look she used to give us when we were children and were caught taking biscuits from the pantry. When I turned to cousin Jethro for support, I was taken aback by the strange way he stared at me.

"I thought you'd be pleased if I could mend the clock," I said to him when Annie left the room. "The old place hardly seems the same without it."

"I know you mean well," he replied. "But mum wants everything to stay just the way it was when dad passed on. The clock was part of him, and I suppose you could say it sort of died with him. Starting it again wouldn't seem right."

"But you don't see it like that, surely? Your father wouldn't have wanted it this way. He'd have wanted his old clock to go again, I'm sure."

My cousin shrugged his shoulders and slumped down in a chair opposite me. He suddenly covered his face with his hands as if deeply troubled.

When he looked up, there was a strange mistiness in his eyes. "I suppose you're right," he said. "But, you see, it's not only what mum thinks. There's...er...a lot more to it than that."

"Tell me about it," I urged gently.

"It's kind of difficult to explain."

"I want to understand," I said. "I'm a better listener than I am a clock-mender anyway."

Jethro still looked doubtful. "Well, up to a fortnight ago I would've said to go ahead and mend the clock. There's nothing I'd have liked better, you know, than to see dad's old clock going again."

He stared at the floor, and I waited for him to continue.

"A couple of weeks ago I started to get these queer dreams, well, nightmares really," he said. "You see, the idea came to me that it wasn't just coincidence the clock stopping when dad died. Neither was it that old belief that it stopped out of some sort of respect, though I reckon that's maybe what mum thinks." He shook his head sadly. "No, rather he died because the clock stopped, as if his life was somehow attuned in some queer way with the life of the clock."

When Jethro paused, I noticed how strangely quiet it was in the house without the deep ticking of the grandfather clock. As children we'd come to regard that sound as a very special part of Sevenoaks farm, almost like the giant heartbeat of the old place.

And I remember how uncle Ben would gather us all together and proudly open the front of the wooden case to show us those mysterious pulleys and the brass pendulum slowly measuring out the minutes in its purposeful swing. Whenever I think about time, I always imagine that pendulum.

"Dreams are funny things," I said. "Your father so loved his clock that I suppose you unconsciously..." I struggled to find the right words before admitting defeat. "I don't know, Jethro, I really don't... But after all it's only a dream, a fantasy. Perhaps if I did manage to fix the clock, then you'd have no more bad dreams."

"That's as may be," replied Jethro. "But I'm afraid there's more to it than that. You see, I dream that the clock suddenly starts again by itself. And when it does, something awful begins to happen..." He lowered his eyes, and started to play nervously with his hands.

"What do you mean? What awful thing?"

"You know dad was buried in St. Benedict's churchyard," he continued. "Well, you see, when the clock starts the soil on his grave - it sort of, er, begins to move as if something was pushing it up from beneath." There were tears in his eyes. "It's awful... You see, his body, at least what's left of it after all these years, pushes the earth aside and comes up out of the grave..."

I stared at him, lost for words.

"There's worse to come," he moaned. "The body m...marches across the fields from the graveyard to the house..."

I listened to my cousin in horrified silence, my mind picturing the re-animated corpse, no longer uncle Ben but some evil parody of the old farmer, tramping along with its skeletal arms outstretched like a ghoulish sleepwalker.

"It marches across the fields," he repeated. "And it finally arrives at the house after twenty minutes have gone by on the old clock. Then there's this hellish tap-tapping on the door!"

As I waited for him to continue, I almost expected the silence to be broken by a mournful rapping at the door.

"What happens then?" I asked nervously.

"That's usually when I wake up. But sometimes I see what it is that mum sees when..." (the rest was a hoarse whisper) "when she opens the door!"

We sat together in silence for several minutes with Jethro slowly shaking his head. I stared uneasily at the clock, which had taken on a new and terrifying significance. I was suddenly afraid it might start again.

A quotation from somewhere was nagging at the back of my mind. How did it go? 'Men talk of killing time, while time quietly kills them.' Of course, it was just a play on words, but it now seemed strangely apt.

"Have you told anyone else about this?" I asked him.

He said not.

"Well, there must be something you can do. Have you seen a doctor?"

He shook his head. "I'm not seeing any doctors! You see, I'm afraid ... afraid they'll say I'm going out of my mind. It took some courage for me to tell you about all this, you know. But it'd got to the stage when I sort of had to tell someone or else I thought I'd go properly mad. And, of course, I could hardly tell mum about it. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered uncertainly.

That was the last time I spoke to Jethro. I was due to leave the following morning, and he was already out somewhere on the farm when I packed the car and said goodbye to Aunt Annie. Perhaps, I thought, he was too embarrassed to see me after our talk the night before.

I was too busy with my job to give much thought to my cousin over the next six months or so. But then one morning I received two letters from the Sevenoaks area. The first was a short note from a friend in the village. It told me there had been trouble up at the farm. Jethro was 'in care after going berserk one night and letting off his shotgun in the house.' My friend went on to say that Annie was unhurt but she was being kept under sedation at the local hospital.

I looked at the second letter with a certain sinking feeling. It was from my cousin and had been posted the day before. It was hurriedly written and the handwriting was shaky. Some words were too blurred to make out.

It appeared that on the anniversary of uncle Ben's death the old grandfather clock had suddenly started to go again.

'Imagine my feelings,' wrote Jethro. 'The clock was going again just like in my nightmares. You know how I was about it. I thought I would go mad. And you remember I told you it took just twenty minutes for the corpse to walk from the churchyard to the house. Then mum would open the door.'

I stared at his letter in dismay, remembering the details of my cousin's gruesome story. Perhaps I should have told somebody about his macabre fantasy. I felt partly to blame for whatever had taken place.

'I had a horrible feeling that my nightmare was coming true like I told you,' continued the letter. 'I sat watching the minute-hand slowly creeping round the clock-face, and I felt so helpless and unable to stop what I felt sure was going to happen. I could bear it no longer, you know. Desperate I was. Only another five minutes and there would be that dreadful sound - that dismal tap-tapping.'

'I was in a terrible state by then. You can imagine. But what was I to do? How could I stop it happening? The only thing in my mind was to somehow stop the clock. So I got down my old shotgun and loaded it. And I fired both barrels at the clock. It was for the best, you know. Yes. But now I am worried they will not believe me when I tell them about the dream. Only you know it is all the truth. So you must tell them how it was - about the clock and about the body coming out of the grave. You must tell them. Then they will believe me and understand how it was.'

There was no more, just his name at the bottom. I put the letter down and gazed out of the window. Poor Jethro, I thought. There was surely something I could have done to save him from his macabre delusions. The blame for all this, I felt, was partly mine. I should have told someone, have warned them. But how was I to know it would go this far?

'Men talk of killing time...'



THE DROWNED CAR

Ramsey Campbell

When dreams are shaped by conscience
There's nothing you can do but stay awake.
At first he thought he'd read the Bible for his sins
(Last night one hundred miles back he'd fought sleep
With nothing but the tapping on the pane -
And this hotel room was featureless,
And if he looked at it for long the lined wallpaper stirred like
disturbed water)
But he'd proved he could condemn "fornication" for himself,
Yet "Thou shalt not kill" was barbed.
He sought peace in the wall,
But the lines were now of print which he tried to read,
And then, abruptly, didn't.
Then the blankets round his feet - they didn't change, exactly,
But were a face clubbed out of shape,
Down to the hanging flap of skin.
He wriggled free, and the face caved in.
He couldn't find the garage light (In the dark
Something touched him)
He struggled: then kicked out: the gears caught: the garage was
swept behind.
Below the city glittered like the sea beneath the moon
And once the night was formed upon the neon
Like some disposal on the moon-track.
The roads were bare as bone, no sign of help.
Obsessively the blackness yielded up leaves packed vast and swaying
Which never, as they passed, maintained their threatened distant
shapes.
But he was sure that from the sockets of an intersection diagram
Burned accusing eyes.
Leaves again, hissing like the sea, like tongues.
In an ebon lake beside the road, inverted, a drowned car paced
him patiently;
He trembled, but its door stayed closed, black, waiting.
Then light stabbed round the bend ahead
From two dead, pitiless eyes which floated closer.
He threw out a hand to blind the eyes,
And his other missed the wheel.
The last thing he heard was a woman's scream
(From the car ahead, its headlights undimmed)
Then he was falling, and the drowned car rushed to meet him.



THE ELBOW

David G. Rowlands

FR. O'CONNOR AND I had been walking the downs for some time when thirst dictated a detour into the nearby village of Clerechalk. It was about mid-day as we passed a little garage on the outskirts, still with hand-operated petrol pumps. A young man in dungarees was turning the handle rhythmically to provide fuel to a dilapidated old Austin 14, the rear seats of which were piled high with a bundle of hay and old sacks. Behind the pumps was the workshop, with table outside on which stood a bowl of water. Another man in overalls was pulling off his shirt prior to washing in the bowl. As the first man went into the shed to change a pound note, he tapped the disrober on the shoulder. Enmeshed in his shirt, the other was startled, jumped and aimed an ineffectual kick at his partner.

Fr. O'Connor stopped suddenly. "Now, there's a coincidence for you," he exclaimed. "Do you know the parish church here?"

"Not at all," I said; my awareness of village churches stopping for the most part at using their towers as landmarks.

"Well, we'll just make another little detour, then," he said, leading the way down a dusty lane.

The parish church was a striking building, with a fine pointed spire clearly defined against the blue sky. Its stone walls were already bleaching back to a rather stark white in the sun, after being dampened and green-stained during the winter months.

It was cool but bright inside, for most of the windows were of clear glass. Even I could appreciate the loving care with which the interior

was maintained by what must be an army of church 'helpers'.

Fr. O'Connor led the way up into the chancel, to an elaborate pew against the South wall: a row of individual seats all joined together. The choir stalls had the usual carved poppy heads, and the two prayer desks on opposite sides had very fine carvings on their fronts; one I could clearly identify as a proverb: 'Who sups with the Devil needs a long spoon'; the other appeared to be a scene from a Bestiary, as there were representations of monkeys, a fox carrying off a goose on its back, and even a dancing bear. The row of seats on the South wall were what claimed the priest's attention though. Each had an arm rest with a plain end that sloped down to an 'elbow' as it is called, and each elbow was a fine carved figure: again some beasts, on another a cowed monk, and so-on.

He had picked up the board (rather like a hand mirror without glass) on which were tabulated points of interest for the visitor to the church, and read aloud:

'In the chancel (South side) can be seen a row of stalls once owned by the Cresswell family, incorporating woodwork obtained from Clerebury Cathedral in 1709. A notable feature of which are the elbows depicting beasts of the chase and a comic scene of a man struggling to remove his shirt without undoing the buttons.'

"This," said Fr. O'Connor tapping the hand-board with his finger, "is typically misleading. Take a look at that particular carving, now..."

I did as he suggested, crouching alongside the stall to get close to it. It was clearly very old, yet despite years of wear from hands resting on the carving, the detail was still quite sharply rendered.

"What do you make of the shirt?" he asked, and I peered at the folds of the garment. "Why it's one of those things priests wear," I said. "I know - a surplice!"

"Just so; and I would suggest that, far from removing it - or trying to - he's endeavouring to hide his head; like an ostrich."

"You may be right," I answered. "It's difficult to tell."

"I know I'm right," he asserted confidently. "And I'll tell you the story on our way homewards."

After a 'Ploughman's Lunch' at the 'Druid's Rest', we began the tramp homeward over the Downs.

"The reasons why I had to attend an evening service at the church there do not affect the story," he began, "suffice it that I found myself in that very pew one evening. The service was rather bucolic and I settled down in no very receptive mood for the sermon. The preacher's voice was slow and monotonous, and his subject uninteresting... I began to drowse, and actually closed my eyes for a moment or two, as I rested my hand on that carving. It had interested me greatly, and I had deduced that it was much older than the rest of the stall, and skilfully 'let in' by the carpenter. The preacher droned relentlessly on, having reached 'Thirdly' but by no means lastly..."

"I fancied I was in the ante-chapel of some cathedral, beautifully fitted out with carved stalls and canopies. A service was in progress, but there was no congregation; just a glimmer of light illuminating the altar and the surpliced Celebrant who was declaiming - a little hesitantly - the New Reformed Service; or so I judged. I supposed I was seeing a scene of the mid-1600's perhaps, for clearly the Rood Screen had not been long torn away. It was meant to be a Mass for the Departed, or some such Catholic survival, and had reached the point we would call the elevation of the Host - and utterly forbidden under the then 'Penal' laws. As I watched, fascinated, I became aware of a darkness, far 'thicker' than the gloom around the altar, spreading from a small chapel on the North side. To my excited senses it seemed as if this shadow, or whatever it was, was extending an elongated, snaky black sleeve to fall on the Priest. He turned on the instant of its encroachment, and - uttering a wild cry - fled toward me, away from the altar and through the body of the Cathedral. Hard on his

heels flowed the shadow, of which I could see little save that it might be human and cowed.

"The unfortunate Priest fled past my viewpoint and into the ante-chapel where he flung himself frantically at the huge wooden door. Finding this unyielding, he collapsed in a twitching heap of terror, abjectly pulling the surplice over his head in a vain attempt to hide. As the shadowy pursuer passed me, I seemed only to notice thin, wasted limbs that were calcined as if burned in a fire. One sleeved arm was thrust out ahead, ending in charred fingerbones. It reached the crumpled figure by the door and I saw those same fingers sink into the neck.

"At this point I must have jerked my head back in horror, for I struck the back of the pew, and woke up with a start and some sort of cry ...to find myself back in the present, and the preacher from the pulpit, other occupants of the Chancel and congregation all staring at me: to my great embarrassment."

"What an unpleasant dream, Father," I said. "Is there anything to account for what you saw?"

"I am coming to that," he answered. "You may imagine that I gave more attention to the carving after the service was over. Unfortunately the Vicar - to whom I'm sorry to say I dissembled my lack of manners as a bout of neuralgia - was one of those dullards who have absolutely no interest in his building and its antiquities! So there was nothing for it, but to turn to the Clerebury Museum.

"I had a deal of help from the Curator, a most enlightened Gentlewoman, and we began to piece together a story of sorts.

"Firstly, that the Cresswell family had engaged a local man, Emrys Henry, in 1790 to refurbish and install in the church, a group of stalls removed from the Cathedral during the Gothic period, when so much that was lovely was swept away and replaced with pitch-pine and railway buffet glazing. Here I was greatly in luck, for this man Henry - a craftsman if ever there was - had left behind a legacy of notebooks of his local works.

"This particular carving - as I had already surmised - was not an integral part of the stalls: it had been an arm-rest of the Dean of Clerebury's Stall. It's incorporation into the Cresswell family pews was due to Henry's sense of the ridiculous, for - artisan and head of the 'Ratepayers Reform League' as he was - he was not above cocking a snook at both his niggardly employers (his notes are emphatic on that point!) but also at the Established Churchmen, for whom as landlords or as prelates he had little time. Indeed I suspect that Henry himself was responsible for the story that the figure represents a comic scene of man struggling with shirt (quite in keeping with the carving trends in ecclesiastical settings) rather than what he actually believed to be the grim reality.

"Among the fragmentary papers that survive from the destroyed Abbey of Clere, this Henry had found one which made it clear that much of the woodcarving subsequently removed from the Cathedral during the Gothic rebuilding had come originally from the Abbey, when that older foundation was razed in 1538; the monks having failed to take the oath of Supremacy and been dispersed in consequence. Looking back at the smouldering remains of his foundation, the Abbot had cursed both those leading him off to execution, and the very remains they were despoiling.

"Nevertheless one Arkwright, a good Catholic and skilled carpenter, salvaged much of the woodwork and stored it away. In this fashion it came to one of his descendants, Anthony Arkwright, who was employed by the new Dean of Clerebury to furnish the choir of the Cathedral. These were indeed the 'Penal' times of the mid-1600's, and the Dean was a renegade Catholic priest, one Geoffrey Hythe, who had secured his office by betrayal of many of his fellow clergy to Cromwell's men.

"From other records of the time, it is clear that one particularly distasteful betrayal by Hythe, was a Dom Petitpierre who had sought (and been promised) refuge by the renegade, and safe passage to France. The unfortunate Dom was handed over directly to the local Commandant however, and burned in the market place at Clere.

"Emrys Henry was shrewd enough to deduce from the carving removed

from the Cathedral, that Arkwright had finished the Dean's Stall just after the death of Hythe had vacated the post. Hythe was found in the antechapel one morning, lying on the floor just inside the massive door; his head buried in his surplice and his neck broken, twisted askew. Arkwright had recorded the grim event by incorporating an earlier carved figure of Death on one of the elbows of the Stall from surviving material from Clere Abbey, and had himself carved the other elbow into a likeness of the murdered Dean."

"What an amazing sequence of events, Father," I said. "Are you sure?"

"Of course not," he replied. "Too much has to be deduced or inferred; and it may be that my own dream or vision of the ghastly event coloured my interpretation of, or even the actual selection of, events from those various fragmentary sources. I am fairly sure in my own mind that Emrys Henry never saw what I did, and was only rather cynically involved: though it is his detective work among the Chapter Archives that we have to thank for our knowledge of Arkwright's role, and of the origins of the materials used. What I should dearly like to know is whether Arkwright saw how Dom Petitpierre was avenged on the Renegade who betrayed him, or whether only I have that dubious privilege. On balance, from the fact that he created a conventional Stall end of the Dean meeting 'Death', I incline to the view that he did not know what happened."

"Which means that you are the only one to put the full story together, Father," I said. "It may be unique, but I can't say I envy you the experience, and I shall certainly be careful where I sit if ever I have cause to visit Clerechalk Church again..."

He laughed, "Yes, and be even more careful that you do not fall asleep!"

(KILLING TIME, continued from page 17.)

When the weekend came I packed a bag and drove down to Sevenoaks. On my arrival my friend told me the sad news that cousin Jethro had committed suicide by jumping out of a seventh-floor hospital window. It was the psychiatric ward, he said.

I needed a stiff drink after being told. So we slipped into the village pub that overlooks St. Benedict's church. There seemed to be a burial taking place. Surely not Jethro, I thought. Not yet. Anyway, my friend would've said something. I remembered the old idea that suicides were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground.

"Whose funeral?"

My friend shrugged and mumbled under his breath. He looked embarrassed as if there was something I ought to know but he was reluctant to tell me.

I let it go. But when I went to the bar to order drinks, I asked the landlord.

"Why, it's the body of old Ben from Sevenoaks farm," came the reply. "It's a funny business an' no mistake." He scratched his head. "He were dead an' buried some years ago, you know, then someone must've come in the middle of the night and dug him up."

I felt an icy finger running along my spine. "Where did they find the body?"

The landlord lowered his voice. "That's the strangest part. You see, they found 'im in a field near the farm. And they swear the only foot-prints were from Ben himself. It was as if he'd been on his way home."

I, SAID THE SPARROW

Joel Lane

1. Broken Vowels

IT WAS ONLY FOUR IN the morning when the sound of birdsong persuaded Helen to give up trying to sleep. Their noise fitted too well into what she remembered of her dream: a museum full of stuffed birds gradually awaking into disjointed life. They screeched harshly, glared with plastic eyes, and flapped into the glass panels. The piano-tinkle of shattering glass was a strangely pure sound. Some cut themselves and bled sawdust; others continued thrashing uselessly against the panes. A raven picked up a large splinter in its beak and began using it to attack smaller birds. That was how it went - most of it, at least. Helen sat up and stared into the long mirror on the wardrobe. She was reluctant to open the curtains and let daylight paint in the colours.

She showered and dressed in semi-darkness, clumsily. Her head was aching, but movement helped her to contain the tension. She began humming vaguely as she combed her hair, and had to restrain herself from breaking into wordless song. "Come in, no-one's at home," she muttered as she let the day into her room; it didn't seem so bright after all. The dawn chorus was interrupted by a lorry passing in the street below. The other day Helen had watched a child trying to cross the road, afraid that a lorry might treat him as it did a fledgeling: turn him into a flat cartoon outline, unnaturally joined to its shadow.

Helen looked through her handbag for a packet of aspirins, tugging at the sides with her fingernails. She turned it upside-down over the bed: purse, combs, blood donor card, throat lozenges, penknife, four identical passport photos, tissues. And so on. Eventually, a brown bottle with two white tablets remaining. She washed them down with water that tasted of rust.

There was a thud in the hallway. Her latest photographs had arrived. She shuffled them, disconcerted by the unrealistically bright colours. Pictures, already sharper than her memory, of herself and Martin in Wales. Gulls forming a jagged collar for the sun over a gaunt cliff. Martin among trees, fidgeting, camera shy. And again, framed in the black triangle of a cave mouth. Helen on a cliff-top, as though she were about to stretch down and touch the grey sea whose sudden proximity made her feel sick. She remembered the stink of a chlorinated swimming-pool in the city. (No water, anywhere, was clean.)

Helen reflected that there was something depressing about any living image captured on film. Was that why the cinema these days seemed to her to be nothing but a parade of false energy, of colour and noise? She coaxed the strip of negatives out of its pocket, and held them up to the light. Martin's face was glossy black, his hair a white streak, his eyes and mouth dull red. For the first time that day, Helen smiled. The negative revealed him as a vampire. As they all were. If her camera really did steal their souls, it was only a fair exchange.

2. Between the Salt Water and the Sea Strand

On their fourth day in Pembrokeshire, Helen sang once more. She had known it would happen here, where Martin was away from the environment he was used to. Even on the train, with their first glimpse of the grey sea in the distance, she had a sudden image of the water as a drenched blanket pulled up over her face. Martin continued to stare out of the window, but she had to look away.



It didn't help that their flat was badly in need of redecorating: a thin coat of whitewash did not disguise the patches of damp on the wall-paper, and the ridiculously thick pile carpet harboured a substratum of clotted dust. It felt nocturnal, even by daylight. They resolved to spend as little time there as possible; but rain kept them indoors for most of the first day. The next morning was overcast, but Helen was determined to swim. Martin prowled up and down the shingle beach, fully dressed. "It's not weather for bathing," he'd said. Helen slowly walked down the uneven slope; close up, the water was murky and flecked with scum. There were few waves. Her usual pleasure in surrendering to the water's hold was lacking: for once she felt too heavy, conscious of her bones. Her hair trailed on the surface as she swam. In the distance, a few boats were gathered for fishing.

When the waves stopped, she was so confused that she missed a stroke and passed under the surface, as easily as a paper-knife slitting open an envelope. The cold stuck to her face and refused to let it go; it pushed salt between her lips just as she broke free, coughing and spitting. She must have had a brief attack of cramp. Overhead, a gull was in flight but did not appear to be moving. She turned to face the shore. And turned again. There was nothing but flat grey water in any direction.

She might have sung then, but - as the seagull glided down and out of view - her limbs regained movement, pushing her forward. She could not have turned around at all, then: the beach was near, and she could see Martin waiting by the cliff. As she drew nearer to him she did not feel any less alone. With half of her mind she watched the slowly fading image of herself, frozen like a plaster cast in a static fluid that was not really physical, and was filled with reaching hands and faces.

"Have a good swim, then?" Martin asked when she had limped over the shingle between them. She nodded; it would be senseless to blame him, even privately, for what had happened. He touched her arm, then drew his hand away as though shocked to discover that it was wet. "You're cold. We'd better go before it starts raining."

Rubbing her hair with a towel, she said: "Why don't you learn to swim?"

"What, and freeze to death? Anyway, this beach is polluted." That was because it was in a fairly sheltered bay, Helen thought; which was also why the water surface was so still. She dressed in a hurry, before she was properly dry, and her clothes stuck to her uncomfortably. Impatient to find shelter, Martin scanned the pale cliff face. The wall was scored with low, narrow caves.

At the end of the beach, the two crossed a strip of gleaming rocks. Helen glanced into the pools, but nothing seemed alive. If she pushed over any large stone, she knew, something would be exposed. Ten years ago she had dislodged crabs and eels with keen curiosity; but this time, she was discouraged by a sense of, well, the authority of luck. When the pulse of her life drew out, she too relied on concealment. She followed Martin, clinging to the idea that this clear, neutral stasis around her was intended as a kind of protection.

The next day Helen kept clear of the sea. Apart from a moment when she was posing for a photograph on a clifftop and believed that her feet were carrying her backwards without her knowledge, the day passed harmlessly. By evening she became aware that her face, shoulders and arms were sunburned, though only their colour told her how much they would hurt later. Martin, with his fairer skin, would have suffered more; but he had been more careful to remain in shade. Helen had not considered that fire, as well as water, might be a threat to her at present. Wherever she looked the sun kept getting in her eyes, as though they were camera lenses incapable of adapting to excess light.

By the end of the afternoon, as they climbed a long road inland to their flat, Helen felt confused and dehydrated. Her lower lip was cracked. At the top of a hill she turned and looked back: the road ended abruptly in a horizon annexed by the dark sea. "What are you doing?" Martin called. He was in the distance, already shrinking. When she caught him up she was unable to speak. He glared at her and marched on.

Helen had once read something that compared a haunted house to a bath that became steadily hotter: you didn't know when to start screaming. That had always amused her; now it seemed irrelevant. You didn't scream if you had to save your breath for walking; also, it gave you away. She would just have to wait until water gave way to fire.

She cooked their dinner, then stood watching it start to burn, only turning off the gas when the meat was blackened. "What the hell's the matter with you?" Martin asked. "You've been acting strangely all day."

"Why don't you cook if you don't like it?" They ate without exchanging a word. Outside, the evening was unusually bright, almost artificial: the sea's vapour dispersed the sunlight, so that shadows were undefined. The flat grew dimmer, but neither bothered to put on the light. Helen sat and watched a film on the flickering black-and-white TV, which periodically broke into fits of static. When the news came on, she hastily switched channels. Martin sat by her on the couch and put an arm on her shoulders; she twitched angrily.

"What's the matter?"

"Sunburn." His arm was tense. He slid it over her back; she ignored him. Helen wanted to rest inside her own stillness, where the only movements were illusory changes on the screen. In the room, too, dark had extinguished the colours. The contours of Martin's face were simplified; he looked boyish. His eyes and mouth were dark patches. But, like the faces kissing on the screen, he was an image: he could pass through her without touching her - and frequently did. "Can't you leave me alone for a minute?" she muttered.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe you'd be better off taking a holiday on your own." After a few minutes he stood up. "Well, I'm going for a walk. Want to come?"

"Why, do you need someone to hold your hand when you cross the road?" Helen said. That was cruel - but he was several years younger than she, and it was useful to make him aware of it.

He stared at her furiously - she thought he was about to hit her. "You think you're so clever, don't you." The door slammed. Outside, the

pattern of dark on light was reversing itself. Helen drifted, editing versions of Martin's face, coloured in by the sun, into images from newspapers: identikit faces, victims of assault, passport photos. Her own face felt swollen, pressed toward a layer of heat. She drew her arms closer into her invisible shell.

A child's head poked above a surface of dark water; its mouth was a gaping O, but no sound came. It widened, a toothless crater, splitting the face in both dimensions. Water poured into the hole. She snatched out, caught air. A chorus of voices muttered in the distance, coming nearer. She's to blame...she watched and did nothing...she thinks she's so clever ... Helen turned to face them, and they retreated behind a door that clicked shut. No, it had opened. Martin's footsteps sounded in the hall.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" he said. She took his hand, not sure which was worse: to respond to him, or to remain alone. In the window, sea and sky were merging; it was possible, again, to believe the waves very close. She wanted to kiss him, diminished as he was by night, but her mouth was too dry; silent, she followed him through a sequence of doorframes.

In bed, sunburn made their skins over-sensitive. A film of sweat joined them together. The stillness overtook her again, this time trapping her somewhere down inside her moving body. Weighted by these two forms, she would sink to a region where the tides would not affect her. In the dark, she floated and listened to the sound of the two bodies dying; either could be her own. The great black mouth was all around her, chewing; if she fed it these struggling figures, perhaps it would let her alone.

As fear grew within her, taking hold of her shape, she cast around for an image. A hand held a white square under the surface of a chemical fluid. The square rippled; a grey picture began to emerge. (The fear escaped through her mouth and hands.) It was a human figure, growing darker as the hand kept it in place. The transition from Ariel to Caliban took about eight seconds. (Through the pores of her skin.) The square was black. It was the window. Now there was no neutral place for her. If she cried out, she heard nothing. The darkness split into two; the only difference between the halves was that the one she occupied was not sleep.

Helen had been watching the small window for several hours when it became light. Calmly, she rose, dressed and left the flat. The streets were empty. Already, her throat was beginning to tighten. In the harbour, boats were frames for tarpaulin sculptures. The tide was in, a light mist carried on it beginning to dissolve the first row of houses. She followed the cliff path along the thin arm of land that ended in black, splintered finger-nails.

The song grew in her lungs and head as she climbed down into the water, leaving her clothes on a rock. It was terribly cold but she kept swimming, aware that if she lost the sense of her body she would drown. She sang as her arms thrust the waves past her. It was difficult, and her throat was soon painful. Her mouth hurt; when she touched it the salt made her cracked lips sting. The mist was lifting as she finished. The sun forced a blade of light into the shallow gap. Down that silver path the bird came, though she was dazzled and did not see it until its landing splashed in her face. Helen caught its head and neck in one hand and its foot in the other. Closing her eyes, she forced its warm body down below the surface and pressed it to her until it gave up struggling. When there was no pulse under the drenched feathers, she let it float to the surface. Then she sang again, briefly, differently. When she crawled back onto the rocks she was crying, but only with exhaustion. The chief thought she had was of sleep. The sun dried her where she crouched on the newly-exposed sand, out of sight of anyone on the cliff path. Then she began the slow climb up the steps, one hand touching the metal rail, the other pressed to the raw, sunburned patch just below the hollow of her throat.

3. Intercession

The girl was running - from what, she didn't know; but she might if she found somewhere that was away from it. The path beside the rusted tracks was slippery with dead leaves; there was a pool up ahead, extending under

the low bridge. A cloud of gnats made a heat-haze above the stagnant water. The girl tripped as she crossed the slope around the pool, and caught hold of a rotten log. She knelt for a few seconds, breathing hard. Then she wiped her hands on the legs of her jeans and went on more carefully.

Under the bridge, she stopped and rested. Broken glass shone around her feet. There was a strong odour of dead wood, brick dust and foul water. Here, at least, nobody could see her. After weeks of hardly leaving her room, the bright sunlight made her feel terribly exposed. She knew this was a place that she ought not to come to alone; but she had to, even so. If only to find out whether she truly had fears of her own. Cars passed overhead, making the brick wall tremble.

She was making up her mind to go back when she heard the voices. They came from beyond the bridge, where the path gave way to a dense cluster of trees and undergrowth. It sounded as though three or four women were arguing in a foreign language - a rush of vowels in which words were impossible to distinguish. Alarmed but intrigued by the voices, the girl started towards their source.

Something dark moved ahead. The girl froze behind a tree and waited. Nothing moved; the bizarre chorus went on. She realised that not knowing what was there would only leave her more helpless, and for longer. She took another few steps, and found that she was looking into a small clearing. A woman was crouched over a large, flat stone, rocking back and forth. Her hands were stabbing the air. She wore a short black raincoat and trousers, and her long, dark hair was blowing around her face. Though she was facing away from the girl, it was clear from the movements of her head that she was singing. It took the girl a while to realise that all of the voices she heard came from this woman.

At last, there was silence. The singer maintained a frozen posture, looking upwards into the trees. The girl followed her gaze, but could see only sunlight flickering in brown leaves. Then there was a brief flurry of wings; and the woman was holding a small bird, perhaps a wren, in her cupped hands. Immediately, she brought it down onto the stone, pulled out a tiny knife from her coat and stabbed the bird. There was a single, thin cry. A loose feather blew off the stone. Then the woman began to sing again. This was different: a single voice, and a quiet sound that could have been a human imitation of birdsong. When this was finished she began using the knife to dig a small hole in the soil. She was a young woman, under thirty, the girl saw. She was extremely thin. Fear radiated from her like a heat-haze, stronger than that of anyone she had yet encountered; many shades and tints of fear, some faint with age, others violently new and exposed. But none had power to affect the girl - and this realisation, amazing to her, prompted her to come forward.

The woman stared at her, open-mouthed, silent. The girl knew that her own fears were being sensed and found harmless. And as they looked at each other, a thin, shivering woman with blood on her fingers and a ten-year-old girl who had become afraid of everyone but the unknown, each felt herself released into something like tears. The woman stood up and stepped forward. The girl passed through a frame of trees into the open space. They began to talk.

Helen explained the song: what it did, why it was necessary. "But I don't know how I came by it. Perhaps it was pure luck that I found a way to keep alive." They walked slowly back the way that Jane had run.

"I came here because it was all abandoned, full of things that were thrown away," Jane said carefully. "And I wanted to think about going away. I was sure they'd put me in care. And that would be...well, I'd go mad. I didn't know there was anyone else who - " She paused. "Who - what?"

Helen looked thoughtful. "You know, I think we're like the negative of vampires. People whose blood leaks out... Vampires have no reflections, but we reflect in everything. But then nothing reflects quite right."

There was silence for a while. The descending sun polarised the scenery, directing their shadows backward. Wind shivered in the arches of trees like moving dust. Then Jane asked quietly: "But will I have to learn the song, then?"

After a longer pause, Helen answered: "If necessary. But perhaps we can find another way. I don't know." They walked in the angled sunlight on either side of the derelict railway, the track between them. To an observer on the next bridge, they might have seemed to be a mother and daughter out for a walk. The elusive similarity in their rather serious expressions would have made them good subjects for a photograph.

DARK DREAMS

beneath my skin
the bones stretch and crack
in splintered shafts of pain
as bent double
in the searing red mist
i feel the hunger deep within
and with the final vestige
of an earlier time
feel too the deep revulsion
against such a dread sweet hunger
but then the hunt
fills my senses and my sight
my nostrils quivering
in the soft wet air
of another lunar pattern
and my feet
now strangely strong and quiet
mark their own rythmn on my flight
past sleeping houses and their dreams
of sad and petty tomorrows
until on the corner
where concrete kisses the open spaces
and the dull yellow lights
fade into velvet calm
i raise my head
fangs glinting like silver
and howl my passage to a darker world
then turning
slope hungrily into the night
as all my dreams of life
turn slowly
into the cool red taste of death
and my sweet dreams
slide gently into the dark depths
of your now troubled rest

DAVE REEDER



THE LYCURGUS CUP

Ron Weighell

THE TRAVELLER CROSSING THE 'wide, wild houseless downs' of Hampshire by way of the Westchester road will come upon a spot a couple of miles west of the village of Yarreton where the way turns west and falls steeply into one of many small valleys cut by ancient rivers. At the bend of the road stand a pair of ruinous stone pillars, the remains of a once magnificent gateway wide enough to accommodate the grandest of horsedrawn carriages. The road between them is now rutted and overgrown, apparently leading only to a high, open field. The pillars themselves offer no feature of interest, and the surrounding area is desolate, so the appearance of a solitary walker approaching those pillars one bitter November afternoon would have puzzled our hypothetical traveller. He might have concluded that the slight, crop-headed girl in fashionably unkempt clothes must be on an errand of some importance beyond his conjecture, and feel smugly that his was the warmer and more comfortable lot.

In fact, the girl who answered when she chose to answer at all, to the name of Vallance, was a freelance journalist, and her purpose in visiting the area, a strange one indeed. A week before, a child on a charity walk had been terrified by a glimpse of a "large cat-like animal" in the vicinity of the old posts, prompting a few 'silly-season' reports in local papers. Vallance, who further compounded the journalistic shortcomings of being young, female and rebellious by actually keeping an open mind on such matters, had played no part in the reports, but they had interested her sufficiently to think the matter worth a more level-headed examination. Having drawn a blank at the child's house - his parents had had enough of reporters, and let her know it - she had decided on a visit to the scene.

The gateposts were of pale stone, surmounted by roughly egg-shaped finials and smothered with ivy. The right-hand post was tilted and diminished a little by subsidence, as though the damp tendrils were dragging it down into the earth. It was from between the posts that the creature had emerged, as far as the child could recall. (The day had been foggy, the glimpse momentary.) Vallance recalled another such mystery cat report in a national newspaper, accompanied by a photograph of a farmer holding up the remains of a sheep, little more than an articulated skeleton hanging from a bloody head. The farmer's description came back to her. "Taken to the bone," he had said. Vallance looked about her. "Taken to the bone." It was an easy thing to scoff at in a newspaper office of a pub (she thought of Sidney Ingrams, fat and slightly sozzled, discoursing on his favourite bar-room topic, 'nutters',) but up here, in the gathering winter twilight, it was another matter. She shivered, cursed her vivid imagination, gave her nose a peremptory wipe with a fingerless woollen mitt and wandered on between the posts. The rutted road ran uphill and swept around the crumbling foundations of a once-vast building. Rolling uplands stretched away into hazy darkness. The place was ominously silent. The few lines of stone blocks and areas of rain-bleached tiles hinted at the imposing ground plan of the house. At one point, the earth had given way, leaving a dark, cavernous space. Were there cellars? In any case she had no torch, and a light sleet was beginning to roll in with the twilight. Feeling cold and decidedly alone, she concluded that she had done enough. What she wanted now was warmth and a good, stiff drink. Typically, she delayed that experience by missing the bus.

Back in Westchester she trudged, bedraggled and shivering, to her local, and groaned inwardly to find herself face to face with Sydney Ingrams, an ageing local newspaper reporter on his way down who had taken it

upon himself to give lessons in cynicism to younger journalists on the way up. He gave Vallance, who was a favourite target, the once over and delivered an unsolicited opinion.

"You look like a frozed turd,"

"Thanks Sydney. I've been out to the other side of Yarretton - "

"That wild cat business? Didn't I tell you? I've got that one sewn up."

Vallance retreated behind a long-practiced look of blank vapidty, but her heart sank.

"Yes, all sewn up. Did you know Eddy Howes lives in the area - You know, the pop star?"

"Sorry - I'm still stuck in the adolescent phase - Bartok, Ives, Keith Jarrett."

"Who? Anyway, he's got his own zoo! You still don't get it do you! Look - a big cat escapes, Howes doesn't want bad publicity so he doesn't report the fact - it tears up a few sheep and scares some kid - hey presto - the mystery beast of Yarretton!"

Optimists had died a dry death waiting for Ingrams to buy a drink. Vallance bought herself a short and sat down.

"You don't think that there might be more to it than that?"

"What, like drugs you mean? Glue sniffing? The lad was only a teenager - "

"It doesn't matter - skip it."

"What's that matter with you? I don't know - women." He caught the reaction and snorted. "Now I suppose you're going to call me a male chauvinist pig!"

"I wouldn't say anything so insulting. A pig might be listening."

"Very funny. I remember when the young respected their elders."

Vallance downed her drink and sniffed. "You have to earn it Sydney, you have to earn it."

Ingrams notwithstanding, every instinct screamed that there was more to the story than pop stars and pet lions. But bread and butter work kept her occupied for much of the following day. She completed a piece on an ageing ballad singer who was performing in the town. (Twenty-seven years had elapsed since his last hit record, but the suggestion that he was making a come-back met with an indignant denial. Hadn't his last single made the charts? Under pressure he had conceded that it had reached number 176.) At the first opportunity she made for the library. The archives were situated in the basement, reached by a wrought iron staircase that could have featured in The Haunting and guarded by a middle-aged gentleman whose voice and facial expression suggested a life-long struggle with constipation. The last thing he wanted in his neat archives was a member of the public. After fighting a bitter rear-guard action he followed her down the stairs and hovered at her shoulder, radiating a subtle atmosphere of hysteria as she examined back copies of the Hampshire Gazette and the now defunct Yarretton Argus.

It took barely an hour to explode Ingram's theory. Several years before, a child chorister walking home from Yarretton church had been savaged, supposedly by a stray dog, in the vicinity of Rodhope Manor ruins. Back in the early seventies a 'New Age' group had camped at the site, searching for the 'Grail' which they had "located by psychic means." There was a photograph of their leader, staring out of the page with that wild, dilated gaze unsettlingly common to the missionary and the murderer, the visionary and the madman. There had been reports of rituals in the cellars of the ruin (so there were cellars!) leading to their eviction on some dubious charge of trespass. Further back in time, the typeface changed, the language grew quaint and circumlocutious, but the reports continued. A mystery animal spotted in the '20's'; another in the nineteenth century, seen by the then Vicar of Yarretton who claimed that a large animal had actually entered the church and ripped the altar cloth! (Vallance wondered how that would be worded on an insurance claim.) What was it? A wild cat, or something

stranger? The only thing that remained consistent through the years was the fact that it didn't seem to like Christians much.

Before leaving, Vallance took out a volume of local history, from which she learned that the Rodhope Manor library had been given to Yarreton Church by the last owner of the house. Vallance decided to check out Yarreton Church when she could.

She now had the makings of a saleable piece, tying in the beast with Rodhope Manor ruins, but in the meantime there was the daily grind of bread and butter work, like the interview with a woman who had not missed a single session of Bingo in 14½ years. (This had proved to be untrue. She had missed one afternoon session in 1979 to attend her husband's funeral.) The tedium was relieved a little by a chance encounter with Ingrams, returning from an attempt to gain entry to the pop star's home, his capacious trousers in tatters. "The bastard set his dogs on me! He must be guilty. Why else would he do that?" Thankfully the question was rhetorical. A war of attrition against the probably quite innocent Howes now seemed likely.

It was another day before she was able to make the trip out to Yarreton Church. There was no sign of the vicar, but an old man who was sweeping out the church took it upon himself to give her a guided tour of the interior.

"Chancel arch 'ere is Saxon - so is that there stone chair. This 'ere plaque is eighteenth century, put up by William Meyer 'oo lived up at the Manor."

Vallance woke up and gave the old tablet her full attention: it was a typically doomy piece.

"Lord of All 'Ben Pandira'
youthful fruit of th' Eternal Vine
Christos whose blood in solemn rite
Unworthily we drink as Holy Wine.
Return by the Portal's ancient way,
grant by thy vessel's holy grace
Unveiled Glory of Thy chosen form
sent forth against the Great Adversary's face."

"Mr Biggs, 'ee set them words to 'is own music."

"He's the vicar is he?"

"Ha! 'Ee was once. Revrund Farlowe 'as the livin' these days. Mr Biggs though, 'ee were a real gent. Liked 'is pint. 'Ardly know 'ee were a clergyman to talk to."

Vallance adopted her vapid look.

"Not like Reverend Farlowe, eh?"

"Hm. Too much 'do this, do that' an' 'Ell Fire on Sundays for my likin'. Fundamental like. Mr Biggs were a different case altogether. Course, 'eed been in the forces - seen a bit o' life. Never any trouble when 'ee was 'ere. You look at that plaque - 'undreds o' years that's been there, an' not a mark on it. Couple o' weeks ago 'ee takes exception to the words an' starts rippin' it off the wall. Too 'igh Church I s'pose, with the bit about drinkin' wine. I stopped 'im but 'ee chipped the edge. I told 'im, people won't like it torn off. Nonsense 'ee sez - only the 'enemies o' God' would object. An' 'ee looks at me when 'ee sez it! Anyway, 'ee left it alone all the same. An' blow me, next day there's scratches on the church door too. Reckon 'ee did it in a temper - threw sumthin' at it."

"Oh dear - he doesn't sound very nice. I was hoping he'd let me look at the books bequeathed to the parish by the Meyer family. I suppose they're in the vicarage?"

"They was, when Mr Biggs was 'ere. Then in comes the new broom an' sweeps clean. Out they all go!"

"What! You mean he threw them away?"

"As good as. Look - see that dome down by the gate. Sort o' mausoleum place with winders? Bit o' Victorian jiggy-pokery that is - just a sort o' sextan's 'ut fer spades and boards. They all went in there. I said 'I'll give 'em six months, with the damp an' the rats'. Might as well 'ave been talkin' to meself."

"I don't suppose he'd let me look at them anyway."

The old man sniffed. "I got the key."

"Wouldn't you be worried what he might say?"

It worked: the old man's expression became defiant. Crossing to a cupboard just inside the porch, he produced a huge key and handed it to her.

"Jus' make sure you bring it back mind."

Vallance whistled contentedly on her way to the Victorian structure by the gate, thinking that it would have made a perfect outside lavatory for the Brighton Pavillion. Once inside, her nostrils told her that its suitability was not limited to its appearance. The smell of damp and decay was overpowering. Sleet had penetrated a broken window and saturated the wall below; the ceiling dripped murky water onto mud-clogged spades and lengths of board. Against the farthest wall books stood in teetering stacks. Once-fine volumes had succumbed to the unhealthy atmosphere, their boards mouldy and warped. Porphyry, Proclus, books of verse with titles like The Adorers of Dionysus and The Eleusis Rite. There was even a tattered pamphlet bearing Meyer's name, a catalogue of plunder from the Grand Tour. Money had clearly been no object. The stones from a ruined temple at Thrace had been shipped home and used for building on the estate. Lengthy notes had been added to one item, a 'cup of Lycurgus', a piece of finest Alexandrian glass depicting "Dionysus in his wrath sending forth a panther. On the reverse Lycurgus blinded and entangled by vines awaiting his death." Meyer had appended an account of the myth. Lycurgus was evidently a Thracian King who had molested the followers of the god, only to be smitten by madness and killed by panthers on Mount Rhodope. (The origin of the name Rodhope Manor?) "It is a rare thing," Meyer added, "for Dionysus to be shewn in his wrath, and from this most curious circumstance I must conclude that the vessel was made with intent magical, in response to the persecutions of his worshippers by Xtians."

Tucked into the catalogue at this point was a single sheet of paper covered with ornate handwriting. As Vallance glanced through it, the back of her neck began to prickle.

" - knowing you to be well pleased by such accounts. Throughout September there has been much astonishment and terror in the village, for a tale is abroad of a beast hunting the uplands, causing much slaughter among the herds. The Rector, I hear, but a week ago, being abroad upon some errand found himself in a fog thr' which the low sun strove to shine. The steps of his mount being somewhat led astray, he came at length upon a pair of gate posts that he could not recognise, having curious beasts carved upon their summits. He then discovered, passing as it were thro' an avenue of vapours, sharply silhouetted against the lazy morning light, the very creature concerning which there had been so much ill-conceived debate. It was as well for him that he was mounted. Of the true location of his encounter he can hazard no guess, tho' I will wager that you, being privy to - "

That was all. The single page might have been expressly designed to tantalise. Vallance was sorely tempted to steal the letter, but thought better of it and made a swift shorthand note of its contents. Satisfying herself that nothing more could be gleaned from the Meyer collection, she returned the key and set about the last task of the day. Another, closer, examination of the old gate posts! An hour long trudge followed, ending in bitter disappointment. There could never have been any confusion of the Rodhope gate posts. Even hundreds of years of English winters could not have obliterated so completely all details of Heraldic design. The finials were what they had always been: roughly rounded slabs of pale stone. So the pillars referred to in the letter had not been those of Rodhope Manor! The links had been tenuous at best.

It was then that she saw the nebulous veil of mist that was rolling down the old track from the region of the high fields. It had a faintly luminous quality, as if the sun were setting behind it. Was she facing west? Her sense of direction was hopeless. Passing between the gate posts, she climbed the road in the direction of the light. The mist grew thicker,

the hazy light stronger. Mounting the last rise she stopped, disbelieving the evidence of her own eyes.

She saw the high, steep angle of roofs against the sky, a cluster of tall chimneys and ornamental urns: Many windows, and from every window an angry light blazing out into the gathering dusk. It was from that great phantom bulk that the mist was rolling in slow billowing waves. Even as she watched a sound came, a rhythmic booming and a clangour of struck metal. The sound seemed to break the spell that held her. She fled back down the path through a ghostly cavalcade of coiling vapours that seemed to give way before her and close in behind. Two columns of luminous whiteness appeared before her. As she passed between them the full significance of that cryptic fragment of letter became known to her. For on the summit of each post crouched a carved beast of stone. Somewhere inside her head a voice said with finality, "The portal has opened."

Now Vallance was running through a sea of mist that offered no more than a few yards of vision. She was no athlete; soon every breath was rasping in her throat and a stabbing pain at her side. Somehow she found a second, an unguessed third wind. It seemed that she was turning a treadmill of mists, and with exhaustion came a sudden clarity of thought; she knew that she was not merely running away from fear, but towards the solution to a mystery. She slowed to a flat-footed jog-trot, pushing herself on against the pain. Almost before she was aware of it, a great roaring overtook her, swept by with a blaze of light: a car heading for Yarreton, carrying its occupants safely in a race with the thickening mist for the warmth and comfort of home. Words that she had hardly thought about, words on a dusty plaque, were running through her mind with the rhythm of her steps.

She was all but spent when a low stone wall barred her way. Beyond it lay a scene out of every third rate horror film she had ever seen; mist coiling among grave stones. Scrambling over the wall she staggered to the church porch, thinking with dull irony of the word 'sanctuary'.

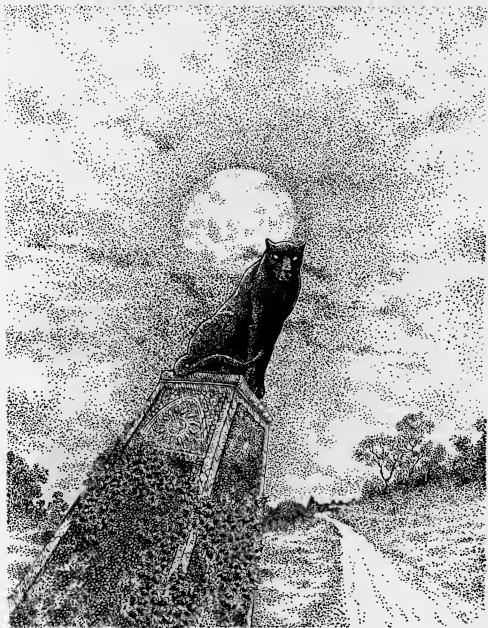
Candles were burning inside; did they still use candles? It was a soft, lovely light. Gulping the dusty tallow-laden air she slumped against a pew and muttered to herself, as though in prayer. But Vallance was not praying.

"Return by the portal's ancient way" - "by thy vessel's holy grace". Forcing herself to rise she walked over to the plaque set up by William Meyer centuries before. But she did not read the whole text. Instead, her eyes passed swiftly without pause, taking in the first letter of each line.

"L - Y - C - U - R - G - U - S". The Lycurgus Cup, formed by adorers of Dionysus with a magical intent, depicting the God in his wrath. Taking up a collection ladle from a nearby pew, she forced the end under the dull metal edge and levered with all her weight. It gave way with a crack that reverberated down the aisles, but not before the plaque had shifted enough to give her cold hands purchase. Behind, there was a space. Reaching in, her fingers encountered a cold, round surface. She drew out into the light the most beautiful object she had ever seen. It was a bowl rather than a cup, with a shallow foot and a rim of silver, and it threw back the candle-light with a bloody sheen. The glass was covered with raised images almost oriental in their richness. A vine-crowned youth pointing, at his feet a running beast like a huge cat. A figure entangled in vines surrounded by satyrs. Her fingers involuntarily sought out the voluptuous curves and hollows of the bowl's surface.

Slowly, the realisation dawned upon Vallance that thin wisps of vapour were curling on the periphery of vision. She turned as though in a dream. The aisles were submerged in a rolling tide of mist that welled and lapped through the open door, swamping the pews, breaking about the bases of the columns. Just above the swirling surface of this mist a long, dark-glistening back moved with a sleek clenching of muscle. Twin ovals of yellow light blinked on a level with her waist and a deep, deep rumble throbbed in her ears.

Vallance stood watching with a kind of light-headed detachment as the beast moved towards her. Its motion was slow and heavy, but inexorable. She stared into the advancing face, expecting horror, but instead



of fear, she felt awe. It was beautiful and radiant like a black sun, and she could feel its sinuous power as surely as she could feel the curves of the glass under her fingers. The eyes radiated a force that struck to the heart and her reaction was in its way more disturbing than terror. She felt the wild, uncontrollable thrill of absolute abandon, the joy of leaping and tearing; the seductive delight of complete release. Those yellow, unfathomable eyes were moving closer, not just because the beast advanced, but because she was stepping forward to meet it, and in that second her only wish was to cast herself into the golden abyss, to be lost. Her hands fell limply to her sides, the cup dropped and burst, a bomb of fabulous pink shrapnel that peppered her legs with stinging shards. The ensuing silence resounded with the impact like the tremor of an impalpable bell.

She breathed again, the mists slowly dispersed, revealing empty rows of damp-bespeckled pews and sweating stone. Then the shivering began. For a long while she stood cold and alone, wondering why her heart was aching with such a pang of missed opportunity.

Over the days that followed, while she tried to take seriously the cosy trivia that passed for local news, Sydney Ingrams grew relentless in his terrier-like pursuit of a pop star and his private menagerie. She almost envied him his ignorance: but he was chasing a dead story.

SORCERY

In a gold and purple room,
With strange shadows softly flitting
Through the champak-laden gloom -

There is indolently sitting
A little dark-eyed maid
In a strangely carved chair
At a table wrought of jade,
With her fingers in her hair.
And a jasper dragon's claw
Holds a gleaming crystal sphere,
Where dim misty vapours are
Which continually veer;
Till the maiden gently sighs
As her eyes of amethyst
See fantastic forms arise
Through the ever shifting mist...

And the atmosphere grows denser
With the fumes that downward curl
From the silver swinging censer
To the silent watching girl;
And though night but slowly passes,
When the first shy sunbeams stare
Through the windows' coloured glasses,
They will find her sitting there...

NORMAN BOOTHROYD



THE HILLS OF RUEL

Fiona Macleod

ONE NIGHT EILIDH and Isla and I were sitting before a fire of pine logs blazing upon peats, and listening to the snow as it whispered against the walls of the house. The wind crying in the glen, and the tumult of the hill-stream in spate, were behind the white confused rumour of the snow.

Eilidh was singing low to herself, and Isla was watching her. I could not look long at him, because of the welling upward of the tears that were in my heart. I know not why they were there.

At last, after a pause wherein each sat intent listening to the disarray without, Eilidh's sweet thrilling voice slid through the silence:

"Over the hills and far away,"

That is the tune I heard one day.

Oh that I too might hear the cruel

Honey-sweet folk of the Hills of Ruel.

I saw a shadow go into Isla's eyes. So I stirred and spoke to my cousin.

"You, Isla, who were born on the Hills of Ruel, should sure have seen something of the honey-sweet folk, as they are called in Eilidh's song."

He did not answer straightway, and I saw Eilidh furtively glance at him.

"I will tell you a story," he said at last simply.

Long, long ago there was a beautiful woman, and her name was Etain, and she was loved by a man. I am not for remembering the name of that man, for it is a story of the far-off days: but he was a prince. I will call him Art, and mayhap he was a son of that Art the Solitary who was wont to hear the songs of the hidden people and to see the moonshine dancers.

This Art loved Etain, and she him. So one day he took her to his dun, and she was his wife. But, and this was an ill thing for one like Art, who was a poet and dreamer, he loved this woman overmuch. She held his life in the hollow of her hand. Nevertheless she loved him truly, after her kind: and for him, blind with the dream against his eyes, all might have been well, but for one thing. For Art, who was no coward, feared one hazard, and that was death: not his own death, and not even the death of Etain, but death. He loved Etain beyond the narrow frontiers of life: and at that indrawing shadow he stood appalled.

One day, when his longing was great upon him, he went out alone upon the Hills of Ruel. There a man met him, a stranger, comely beyond all men he had seen, with dark eyes of dream, and a shadowy smile.

"And so," he said, "and so, Art the Dreamer, thou art eager to know what way thou mayest meet Etain, in that hour when the shadow of the Shadow is upon thee?"

"Even so; though I know neither thee nor the way by which my name is known unto thee."

"Oh, for sure I am only a wandering singer. But, now that we are met, I will sing to you, Art my lord."

Art looked at him frowningly. This man who called him lord spake with heedless sovereignty.

Then, of a sudden, song eddied off the lips of the man, the air of it marvellous light and of a haunting strangeness: and the words were those that Eilidh there sang by the fire.

Through the dusk of silence which that song made in his brain, Art

saw the stranger draw from the fawnskin, slung round his shoulders and held by a gold torque, a reed. The man played upon it.

While he played, there was a stirring on the Hills of Ruel. All the green folk were there. They sang.

Art listened to their honey-sweet song, and grew drowsy with the joy and peace of it. And one there was who sang of deathless life; and Art, murmuring the name Etain, fell asleep.

He was an old, old man when he woke, and the grey hair that lay down the side of his face was damp with unremembered tears. But, not knowing this, he rose and cried "Etain," "Etain!"

When he reached his dun there was no Etain there. He sat down by old ashes, where the wind blew through a chink, and pondered. An old man entered at dusk.

"Where is Etain?" Art asked.

"Etain, the wife of Midir?"

"No; Etain, the wife of Art."

The old man mumbled through his open jaws:

"All these years since I was young, Etain the wife of Art has been Etain the wife of Midir."

"And who is Midir?"

"Midir is the King of the World; he, they say, who makes sand of women's hearts and dust of men's hope."

"And I have dreamed but an idle dream?" Art cried, with his heart breaking in a sob within him.

"Ay, for if Art you be, you have been dreaming a long dream upon the Hills of Ruel."

But when Art, old now and weak, turned to go back to the honey-sweet folk upon the Hills of Ruel, so that he might dream his dream again, he heard Midir laughing, and he died.

"And that is all," ended Isla abruptly, looking neither at Eilidh nor at me, and staring into the flame of the peats.

But Eilidh smiled no more to herself that night, and no more sang below her breath.



CONTRIBUTORS

MALCOLM FURNASS has had work published in various small press magazines including FANTASY TALES 15 ("Down by the Sea".) As well as short stories he writes scripts for comics (D.C.Tomson's STARBLAZER.) "The Cure" is his first tale for DARK DREAMS.

JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON is no stranger to DARK DREAMS, where she has appeared with poetry. Last year we published a superb collection of her poetry, THE GHOST GARDEN, and copies are available for £1.75/\$4 (incl. p&p) from the correspondence address on page 3. Her most recent novel is the brilliantly-titled ANTHONY SHRIEK, published by Arbor House, and Ace are due to release a long-delayed collection of her short fiction. "A Rain of Spiders" is a revised slice of terror which first ap-

peared in an American small press magazine some years ago.

PETER BAYLISS has had stories published by THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE and FANTASY TALES. We are now pleased to welcome him to DARK DREAMS. His non-fiction has appeared in such places as DARK HORIZONS, TITBITS, and THE COVENTRY WEEKLY NEWS. "Killing Time" is an excellent supernatural tale in the WEIRD TALES tradition.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL shouldn't need any introduction to devotees of modern supernatural fiction, for he is without doubt one of this country's greatest exponents of the subtle chiller. THE INFLUENCE is his most recent novel, due out soon in paperback, with a new novel, ANCIENT IMAGES, out in hardcover at the same time. "The Drowned Car" originally appeared in Joseph Payne Brennan's small press magazine MACABRE in 1967.

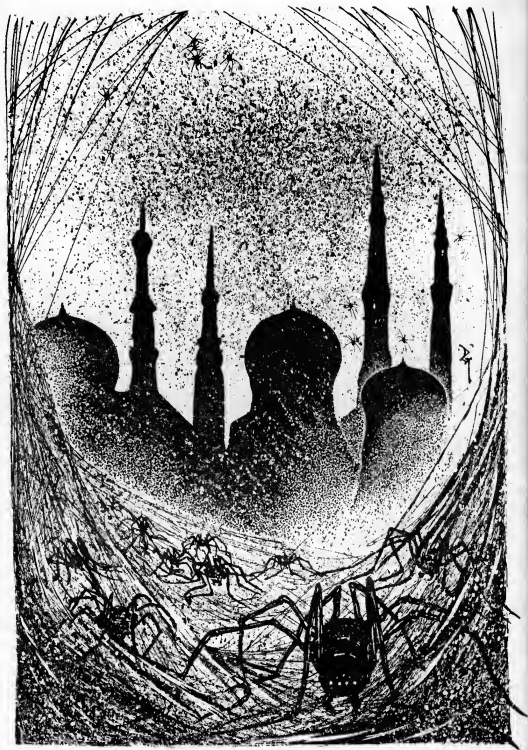
DAVID G. ROWLANDS has appeared in DARK DREAMS on two previous occasions: in issue 3 with "Off the Record" (as by Anonymous) and in issue 4 with "Traveller's Fare", a Fr O'Connor story. The brief, but excellent tale this issue is another Fr O'Connor adventure, and possibly the final in the series. David's most recent appearances have been in Richard Dalby's collection, GHOSTS FOR CHRISTMAS, and in John Winder's CLOSE TO THE EDGE.

JOEL LANE appeared in DARK DREAMS 2 with "The Brand". He returns this issue with an impressive and typically surreal tale. Joel's stories, poems and articles been published in such places as DARK HORIZONS, FANTASY TALES, THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES:15, and most recently in the first issue of AKLO, "Double Cross".

RON WEIGHELL has for a number of years now been associated with Rosemary Pardoe's GHOSTS AND SCHOLARS, where he has contributed articles and stories. In 1986 Rosemary published a collection of his M.R.Jamesian pastiches, AN EMPTY HOUSE AND OTHER STORIES, followed by a non-fiction booklet, ANGLES OF COINCIDENCE: RENNES-LE-CHATEAU AND THE MAGDALEN MYSTERY. As well as work picked up by Karl Edward Wagner's YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES, tales have appeared, or are due to appear, in AKLO 1 ("The Fire of the Wise"), GHOSTS AND SCHOLARS, and, from the same publishers as AKLO, a novella, "The White Road".

FIONA MACLEOD was the nom de plume of the writer William Sharp (1855-1905), and under this name he wrote many Celtic fantasies. One of the most successful things he wrote as Fiona Macleod was the faerie play, THE IMMORTAL HOUR, which was later turned into an opera by Rutland Boughton. The tale reprinted here is taken from the collection, THE DOMINION OF DREAMS. Another Macleod story can be found as the title piece in BY THE YELLOW MOONROCK, a recent booklet of fantasy stories edited by David Cowperthwaite, and available from the contributions address on page 3. Copies are £1.50/\$3 (incl. p&p), cheques and postal orders to made out to David Cowperthwaite.

As regular readers will notice we have made a few changes this issue - as well as extending the page count - which we hope you will approve of. After six issues we felt a change was needed. We would be interested in your opinions on the new look, so please write and let us know.



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